

THE FIRST WEST INDIAN XMAS.

By F. A. Ober.

It may or may not be generally known, but the first Christmas celebration in America took place in the West Indies and in the very year that America was discovered. There was not much festivity about it, to be sure, for the first anniversary of the Nativity in the new world found the participants in a state of mind not conducive to merry-making or cheerful entertainment.

The great navigator, Christopher Columbus, who showed the civilized world the way across the Atlantic, was master of ceremonies, and he had little reason for rejoicing, for on Christmas eve, 1492, he had lost his flagship, the Santa Maria, which had run on a reef on the north coast of Haiti. Fortunately for him and his crew, the native Indians of the island were friendly, and they not only came to his rescue, but saved all the wreckage of his vessel, which they piled up on the beach at Guarico, near the present city of Cape Haitian. The Indian cacique did all he could to allay the grief of the Spaniards and on Christmas day spread a banquet to which they were invited and at which many of his people acted in the capacity of servants.

This was the first Christmas dinner in America, and at this aboriginal "spread" so many new and strange articles of food were offered the Spaniards that Columbus made a note of them, so we are enabled to state exactly what they were. In the first place, there was maize, or Indian corn, which the Europeans may have seen in the Bahamas, but which they had not eaten before. In fact, the golden kernels carried back to Spain by Columbus from this first voyage to America were the first that ever reached the old world, and it was many years after that before brown bread and "Injun pudding" became at all common on the tables of European royalty.

One of the curious tubers offered the Spaniards that day by the Indian chieftain in Haiti was the manioc, or cassava, from which the aborigines made their daily bread. They were the originators also of the cassareep, or West Indian pepper pot, made by throwing pieces of meat of all kinds into an



earthen vessel, where it was preserved for any length of time by the antiseptic properties of the manioc.

Christopher was so taken with the pepper pot, according to a local tradition, that he begged the recipe from the native chef and took it home to Queen Isabella, but whether she appreciated the article or not has not been recorded. Another tuber, the yam, was also served up after roasting in the ashes, but it is doubtful if the potato was on the festive board, though it may as well have been found in the highlands of Haiti as in South America, where it is said to have been discovered long after. Anyway, there were several new fruits, all tropical, such as the guava, custard apple, sapota and pineapple, and in meats there was a great variety, for the Indians shot and trapped the wild parrot, pigeon, doves, agouti, iguana and the utia, the three last named being animals indigenous to the island.

There was one function at that banquet which Columbus may have indulged in, though he has left no record of having been suddenly indisposed, and that is tobacco smoking. He had seen Indians on the coast of Cuba roll up dry leaves of a plant unknown to him and after lighting one end of the roll inhale and puff out the smoke thereof with evident enjoyment. But at this banquet he was astonished to see the chief and his big men cram portions of the weed into a curious pipe, with a branched stem shaped like the letter Y and after inserting a stem into each nostril proceed to fuddle themselves with the narcotic, to the great disgust of the Spaniards, who had a few vices of their own, even

then, but did not smoke. It was only because they did not know how, but Columbus lost an opportunity for adding another laurel to his immortal wreath, and left to Sir Walter Raleigh the introduction of smoking into Europe a century later.

The main object of this article is to point out that down in the West Indies, where dwell our nearest foreign neighbors, and where we have a tidy little island of our own in Porto Rico, the first Christmas anniversary in America was celebrated and the first dinner eaten with aboriginal Indians as the hosts.

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"No man is a hero to his valet," quoted Goethe, adding, "because it takes a hero to recognize a hero."

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